

The Random Jottings of Donald Jay from Nelson in Pendle.

Thomas Potts, the clerk to the Lancaster Assizes must now answer to God for consciously omitting significant details of the court proceedings.

Thomas Potts, the diligent clerk to the Lancaster Assizes, sat at his desk, quill in hand, ready to document the proceedings of the infamous witch trials. It was the year 1612, and the air was heavy with superstition and fear. Potts knew that his task was not only to record the events but also to shape the narrative, presenting a version of the truth that would satisfy the judges and the public.

As the trials commenced, Potts observed the accused men and women, their faces etched with anxiety and despair. Among them were the Pendle witches and the Samlesbury witches, individuals believed to have made pacts with the devil and engaged in malevolent sorcery. The fate of these accused souls hung in the balance, and Potts was determined to capture every detail. However, Potts was not a neutral observer. He was an "active and selective reporter," consciously omitting significant details of the court proceedings. His aim was not to provide an objective account but to present a narrative that supported the prevailing beliefs of the time. He withheld crucial information, such as the fact that all indictments were initially examined by a grand jury, responsible for determining whether there was sufficient evidence to proceed with a trial.

The grand jury's role was vital in ensuring a fair and just legal process. Yet, Potts omitted this step, choosing to focus solely on the trial itself, where the accused faced a petty jury. This selective reporting painted the accused in a more sinister light, as if they were already presumed guilty before their trial had even begun.

Nevertheless, Potts diligently recorded the testimonies and arguments presented in the courtroom. He captured the fear in the eyes of the witnesses as they spoke of bewitchments and curses. He detailed the words of the accused, desperately denying their involvement in dark magic. Potts was aware of the weight his words would carry, and he carefully crafted each sentence to evoke fear and validate the public's beliefs in witchcraft.

Weeks passed, and the trials concluded. Eleven individuals were found guilty and condemned to death, their lives to be taken by the hangman's noose. One person faced the humiliation of standing in the pillory, enduring the scorn of the crowd. The remaining accused, fortunate enough to escape conviction, were acquitted, though their lives would never be the same.

Potts completed his account, "The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster," on that chilly November day in 1612. He submitted his manuscript to the judges, Sir James Altham and Sir Edward Bromley, who reviewed and revised it before its publication the following year. Bromley declared it to be "truly reported" and "fit and worthie to be published." And so, Potts' narrative became one of the most famous and widely circulated records of witch trials in the 17th century. It perpetuated the beliefs and fears surrounding witchcraft, contributing to the continued persecution of those accused of sorcery.

Years later, as society progressed and attitudes shifted, the inaccuracies and biases in Potts' account would be scrutinized. Historians would challenge the validity of his omissions and question the true extent of the accused's guilt. But for now, in the early 17th century, Thomas Potts' version of events stood as the accepted truth—a testament to the power of storytelling and the selective nature of history.

By Donald Jay